

Open *Ware / Closed Branding

Review of Open Design Symposium, May 2012, Linz Austria

D. YOUNG RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES 1.3

The programme for LiWoLi 2012 “Swarm, Perform, Explore: How to Sense the City” appeared to maintain loose connections with the theme of urbanism suggested by this year’s tagline, but it certainly offered a diverse range of events grounded in the ideologies of free and open source software. “Art Meets Radical Openness” summarizes the actual content of LiWoLi more accurately: whether out sensing the city by climbing trees, or sitting in the hot and dark room at the Stadtwerkstatt listening to a lecture about Telekommunisten or The Undernet, there was almost always a direct engagement with concepts of openness, regulation, and community.

Having arrived in Linz a day early, I was able to sit in on a one-day event called the Open Design Symposium. It promised to explore and discuss similar ideas to the events over the following days at LiWoLi, but after attending the first couple of lectures I quickly realised that there was a conceptual shift in how the presenting artists and designers talked about openness. For them, it was much less of a radical political stance that challenged proprietary systems or a disengagement with capitalist economics, but more of a way in which they could create products while remaining within the scope of capitalism and essentially earn a profit through the business of education. Words such as marketing, branding, and identity were mentioned liberally alongside the Sesame Street letter of the day “O, for Openness.”

David Cuartielles, one of the founders of Arduino, gave an interesting anecdote that summarizes how openness for such ventures can be problematic. Cuartielles described how he noticed posts appearing on the Arduino forums from customers complaining that their boards were faulty, unstable, and would burn out. After investigating, he discovered that another company had started to make “arduino” boards – but also appropriated the branding and ‘identity’ of Arduino. The Arduino board design is released under a Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike license [ref: <http://arduino.cc/en/Main/Hardware>], meaning that anyone has access to the schematics and firmware and can potentially build their own “arduino”, so the imposter company had legally not done anything wrong by making arduino boards with substandard components, apart from use the trademark Arduino as an attempt to pose as the official brand.

This emphasised an important division between the “arduino” and Arduino: like Tipp-Ex, Xerox and Post-its, the brand had become the object, but in this case, being released under an open license there was not a lot Arduino could do to protect their identity against appropriation. Cuartielles resorted to, as he put it, a “public-shaming”, through advertising the ‘counterfeiters’ on the Arduino website and urging their visitors to avoid buying these boards.

While the ideologies represented at the Open Design Symposium reflect a new strain of Capitalist economics, they seem to fit within Slavoj Žižek’s description of “liberal communism” - namely, to have the “global Capitalist cake i.e. thrive as profitable entrepreneurs, and eat it, too, i.e. endorse the anti-capitalist causes of social responsibility and ecological concern.” [Žižek, 2009: 14] They champion the concepts of empowerment through education: give the customer a construction kit of components and instructions from which they can create anything, all while protecting the brand – the reputational value – of their product.

The sandbox product – the product that is not ready-made, and designed so that the source of its allure is in its construction – is a potentially problematic feature recurring in the design of new commodities and services, and it could be argued that it has become further popularised by the kinds of projects presented at the Open Design Symposium. In the case of Arduino, it is their users that give this particular platform its value: they advertise the product through using it in the weird and wonderful constructions and mechanisms they make with the arduino. They also provide technical support to their peers through the Arduino hosted forums, but also through many of their own websites and blogs. Between the forums, artist blogs, websites, tweets and wall posts, a valuable self-sustaining promotional, educational and support network emerges. For the creators of the content (the users), it is operated under the premise of the “hi-tech gift economy” [Barbrook] - the return for their labour is the ability to demonstrate their expertise publicly online, but also to add to the peer-created information pool that they draw from themselves.

While the arduino appears to be a relatively harmless example of a sandbox product as far as it offers a user-friendly environment for prototyping electronics projects (and have not outlined any plans monopolise the market and become an “evil corporation!”), the design of their product is inherently political. It advocates and promotes a community-led system of information sharing where all participants benefit in terms of access to knowledge, but also inadvertently provide free labour for the development of Arduino brand. To

quote a Wired article from 2008: "But he [Massimo Banzì] suspected that if Arduino were open, it would inspire more interest and more free publicity than a piece of proprietary, closed hardware. What's more, excited geeks would hack it and—like Linux fans—contact the Arduino team to offer improvements. They would capitalize on this free work, and every generation of the board would get better." Replace Arduino with the surrounded-by-suspicion Google, and the above statement immediately becomes more problematic. While David Cuartielles describes himself as a "left-leaning academic", a more in-depth and honest discussion of his own views on these issues would be helpful in trying to reconcile how the value of their brand relates to the labour of the community.

Julian Oliver's presentation later in the afternoon posed a disruption to the preceding consensus of DIY sandbox products. Titled Entry Points: Critical Engineering in The Closed World, Oliver convincingly argues how the infrastructures that enable the functionality of network technologies – from the telephone to the internet - have become increasingly opaque. [ref: <http://www.open-design.at/>] As a result, Oliver suggests that the role of engineering becomes a political act: the engineer has the ability to direct the design of new infrastructures to a more open and critical perspective. Out of all the people who gave talks during the day, he made the best case for using the products of his co-presenters: to re-address the state of technological design and critically engage with a discourse of openness. There was no product to pitch to the audience during this talk, instead he made a provocative and exciting statement about the importance of transparency in design.

While the other presenters did subscribe to this idea of openness, their motivations for doing so seemed to fluctuate between economic practicality and educational possibilities. The conclusion to the evening, a panel discussion featuring all of the speakers from the day, did not appear to offer any new answers to how the community fits into their liberal-communist business models.